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with the Kind regards
of his friend
Benson J. Lossing

Dec. 1860

Martha Washington

MARTHA WASHINGTON.

BY

BENSON J. LOSSING.

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TO THE COUNTRYWOMEN

OF

MARTHA WASHINGTON,

THIS BRIEF MEMOIR

OF

THEIR DISTINGUISHED FRIEND

IS RESPECTFULLY

DEDICATED.

MARTHA WASHINGTON.

MARTHA WASHINGTON.

BY BENSON J. LOSSING.

In the drawing-room at Arlington House, in Virginia, is a portrait of a beautiful woman, young and elegant, yet of matronly gravity. She is dressed richly, but in simple patterns and dignified arrangements. She is plucking a blossom from a shrub, apparently unconscious of the act, for her thoughts are evidently in the direction of her eyes that beam upon some more distant object. It is a pleasant picture, painted more than a hundred years ago, by Woolaston, whose praises were sung by the author of "The Battle of the Kegs," as early as 1758. It is the portrait of Martha Custis, a wealthy widow, and one of the most attractive of the women who graced the Vice-regal court at Williamsburg, the ancient capital of Virginia.

Martha Dandridge, whose ancestor, first in the colonies, was a Welsh clergyman, was a sweet little girl of seventeen, when her charms of mind and

person captivated the feelings of Daniel Parke, only son and heir of Colonel John Custis, one of the King's Councillors for Virginia. Custis was a proud, ambitious, and impracticable man, whose life had been embittered by unfortunate connubial relations. He had married a lady, concerning whom, twice in his life, he wrote with deep feeling.

"May angels guard my dearest Fidelia," he wrote to her six months before marriage, "and deliver her safe to my arms, at our next meeting; and sure they won't refuse their protection to a creature so pure and charming, that it would be easy for them to mistake her for one of themselves." Heedless of the warning of friends who well knew her disposition, he married her. She passed away in the course of years, and he again wrote in reference to her. It was in his last Will and Testament, in which he directed his son, under penalty of disinheritance, to engrave upon his monument, after giving his name, titles and age, these words—"and yet lived but seven years, which were the space of time he kept a bachelor's home at Arlington, on the Eastern Shore of Virginia."

Colonel Custis desired the beautiful and accomplished Evelyn, daughter of Colonel William Byrd, of Westover, for his daughter-in-law; but he was so exacting in his proposed pecuniary arrangements, that the father of the maiden was compelled to write to the suitor that while he should prefer him above all others for a son-in-law, he would not

"trust to such a phantom as Colonel Custis's generosity."

While negotiations between the two fathers were pending, little Martha Dandridge crossed the path of the affections of the younger Custis, and Evelyn Byrd was almost forgotten. The ambitious Colonel Custis was sadly disturbed by this change in the prospects of his matrimonial schemes for his son. He stormed, threatened disinheritance of fortune and parental affection, and refused to listen for a moment to the appeals of the one most interested in the matter. Rumor of this state of things went abroad. Martha was loved by everybody, and from every lip fell praises of her beauty, good sense and amiability, upon the ears of the foiled colonel. Assailed at all points, he finally surrendered, and wrote upon a piece of fair white paper, —"I give my free consent to the union of my son with Miss Martha Dandridge." The friend of the happy suitor to whom this important document was handed, immediately wrote to young Custis, saying :

"This comes at last to bring you the news that I believe will be most agreeable to you of any you have ever heard. That you may not be long in suspense, I shall tell you at once. I am empowered by your father to let you know that he heartily and willingly consents to your marriage with Miss Dandridge—that he has so good a character of her that he had rather you should have her than any lady in Virginia—nay, if possible, he is as much

enamored with her character as you are with her person, and this is owing chiefly to a prudent speech of her own. Hurry down immediately, for fear he should change the strong inclination he has to your marrying directly. I staid with him all night, and presented Jack [Colonel Custis's favorite negro boy] with my little Jack's horse, bridle and saddle, in your name, which was taken as a singular favor. I shall say no more, as I expect to see you soon to-morrow, but conclude what I really am,

Your most obliged and affectionate humble servant,
J. Power.

To Col. Daniel Parke Custis, New Kent."

The happy couple were soon afterward married, and the father of the bridegroom never ceased to rejoice in the good fortune of his son in marrying such a charming girl. They took up their abode at the White House, on the bank of the Pamunkey River, in New Kent County, and were blessed with four children. In the summer of 1757, the husband died, leaving Martha, at the age of twenty-five, one of the wealthiest widows in Virginia, and with beauty unimpaired.

Toward noon on a pleasant day in May, 1758, a fine looking young military officer, accompanied by a dignified black body servant, crossed Williams' Ferry on the Pamunkey, not far from its junction with the York River. He was met by Mr. Chamberlayne, a gentleman living near, and

invited to his house to partake of its hospitalities. The young officer politely declined, giving, as a sufficient reason, the urgency of his business. He was just from the British and Provincial army, then in the early stages of its march toward Fort Du Quesne, and was hastening toward Williamsburg to lay matters of importance before the Governor and Council of Virginia. But Chamberlayne, who coveted the honor of entertaining such a guest, and whose hospitality would never allow a stranger to pass by without attention, would listen to no excuses. He assured the soldier that the detention would be slight, as his dinner hour was early. The officer persisted in his determination to ride on, when Chamberlayne brought a most potent argument to bear upon the traveller. He informed him that a charming young widow was a guest in his family, and that an interview with her during the dinner hour would be full compensation for every inconvenience that might be felt in riding later at night. To this argument the officer yielded, and accompanied the hospitable Virginian to his mansion. Several guests were there. These felt honored by the presence of the stranger, for it was Colonel George Washington, whose fame as a brave and judicious military leader was at that time rapidly blossoming, and whose name had become familiar in households far beyond the borders of Virginia. He was introduced to the young widow, Martha Custis, whose husband had then been dead about a year. They were nearly of the same age—he three

months older than she. They were mutually pleased.

The company sat long at table. Colonel Washington seemed in no haste to leave it, or to take his departure from the house. Bishop, his faithful body-servant, who had been bequeathed to him by the dying Braddock, when carried from the bloody field of the Monongahela, had held his master's horse much longer than he expected to, when ordered to have him in readiness immediately after dinner. The sun approached the western hills, and yet Bishop was at his post. The Colonel lingered with the charming widow, who had fairly captivated him; and Bishop, to his great astonishment, was at last ordered to stable the horses for the night.

It was late the next morning before Colonel Washington resumed his journey. The blossoms of May never appeared so fragrant to him. Far into the night had he and Mrs. Custis been closeted in earnest conversation; and when the business of his errand to Williamsburg was completed, the young warrior repaired to the White House, the residence of the widow, where a marriage engagement was speedily consummated. He then hastened to the army, and toiled month after month among the mountains in the direction of the Ohio, until late in November, when the troops that he commanded raised the British flag over the smoking ruins of Fort Du Quesne, which the French and Indians had burned and deserted on the approach of the invaders. Colonel Washington then

returned to Mount Vernon, clothed in immortal honor.

A brilliant company of Virginia's sons and daughters were assembled at the White House on the 17th of January, 1759, Old Style. It was the wedding-day of the mistress of the mansion. The Reverend David Mossom, rector of the neighboring parish Church of St. Peters, was the magician who, by the alchemy of the marriage ritual, changed the name of Martha Custis to MARTHA WASHINGTON.

"And so you remember," said the grandson of the bride, to old Cully, her servant, then in his hundredth year—"and so you remember when Colonel Washington came a-courting your young mistress?"

"Aye, master, that I do," said Cully. "Great times, sir; great times—shall never see the like again."

"And Washington looked something like a man—a proper man, hey, Cully?"

"Never seed the like, sir—never the like of him, though I have seen many in my day—so tall, so straight, and then he sat on a horse and rode with such an air! Ah, sir, he was like no one else. Many of the grandest gentlemen, in the gold lace, were at the wedding; but none looked like the man himself, master." *

Washington was then an attendant member of the Virginia House of Burgesses, and for three months, while official duties detained him at Wil-

* Custis's Recollections of Washington.

liamsburg, he resided at the White House. At the close of the session he returned to Mount Vernon, taking with him his bride and her two surviving children, John Parke and Martha Parke Custis. Then commenced that sweet domestic life at Mount Vernon, which always possessed a most powerful charm for its illustrious owner. "I am now, I believe," he wrote to a kinsman in London, "fixed in this seat with an agreeable partner for life, and I hope to find more happiness in retirement than I ever experienced in the wide and bustling world."

Mrs. Washington, at the time of her second marriage, was nearly seven-and-twenty years of age. She was a small, plump, elegantly formed woman. "Her eyes," we have elsewhere said, "were dark, and expressive of the most kindly good nature; her complexion fair; her features beautiful; and her whole face beamed with intelligence. Her temper, though quick, was sweet and placable, and her manners were extremely winning. She was full of life, loved the society of her friends, always dressed with a scrupulous regard to the requirements of the best fashions of the day, and was, in every respect, a brilliant member of the social circle which, before the Revolution, composed the Viceregal court at the old Virginia capital,"*

Mount Vernon was one of the centres of a most delightful society along the Potomac, and Mrs. Washington presided as mistress there, with great dignity and urbanity. The mansion was seldom

* Mount Vernon and its Associations.

without guests, either permanent visitors or neighbors who came to join Washington in the sports of the chase. These generally dined at Mount Vernon toward the close of the day, and frequently spent the night there.

Although Mrs. Washington was a devoted mother, and domestic in her tastes and habits, yet in all the years preceding the Revolution, she was much abroad with her husband, and was frequently seen with him at the theatres and dancing assemblies at Annapolis and Williamsburg, the respective capitals of Maryland and Virginia. She had at her disposal a chariot and four horses, with black postillions in livery, for the use of herself and lady visitors; and her equipage was frequently seen upon the road between Mount Vernon and Alexandria, or the adjacent estates.

Domestic happiness at Mount Vernon appeared to be unalloyed, until the year 1773, when death took from Mrs. Washington her daughter, Martha Parke, a girl of rare beauty, sixteen years of age, whose complexion had won for her the common appellation of "the dark lady." That trial was a severe one for the fond mother, and almost equally so for the step-father, who loved the maiden as if she had been his own child. Coming home after a long absence on public business, he found her in the last stages of consumption. He knelt at her bedside and offered up fervent prayers for her recovery. But the inexorable summons had gone forth. She died; and Washington, who had made arrangements for a journey into the wilderness,

with Lord Dunmore, the governor, remained at home to soothe his wife, and recover, himself, from the shock of sudden bereavement.

Less than two years afterward, Mrs. Washington was called to endure other trials. War had been kindled between England and her American colonies. It partook largely of the most bitter civil discord in its practical effects. Neighbor was arrayed against neighbor, family against family, and sometimes brother against brother. The Fairfaxes of Belvoir became the political antagonists of the Masons of Gunston Hall and the Washingtons of Mount Vernon. The delightful social life, so long enjoyed in that neighborhood, was changed. Instead of peace, and confidence, and kind feelings, there was strife, and distrust, and heart-burnings. There was isolation and alienation everywhere.

Washington was called, first to the Senate of the revolted colonies, and then to the chief command of their armies ; and his wife was widowed most of the time for more than seven years. She managed domestic affairs, in the midst of the confusion and frequent alarms, with fortitude, vigor, and prudence. In winter she visited the camp, and was an honored guest at the head-quarters of the army. "Lady Washington, God bless her!" was the toast at every convivial assemblage of the soldiers of every rank. At Cambridge, at New York, at Morristown, Middlebrook, Whitemarsh, and Valley Forge, at Princeton and Newburgh, she was ever the delight of the camp and of the

neighborhood, wherever the flag of the Great Leader was unfurled.

At length the allied armies of America and France marched to the deadly conflict at Yorktown. Mrs. Washington's son, and only remaining child, accompanied the chief as aid-de-camp, leaving his young wife, a scion of the noble family of Lord Baltimore, and their infant children, under the sheltering roof of Mount Vernon. Eagerly did that household look for couriers from the camp. At length, on a frosty morning, one came in hot haste. He announced the victory over Cornwallis, and there was great joy at Mount Vernon. With the next breath, he told them of the severe illness of the son and husband. Then there was silence and sadness, and hasty preparations for a journey. The wife sped to the bedside of her sick husband. His bright lamp of life had dwindled to a flickering taper. Washington soon came to the same chamber, from the field of victory, thirty miles distant. "I was there" he wrote to Lafayette, "in time to see poor Mr. Custis breathe his last." In that hour the young wife was made a widow, and the mistress of Mount Vernon a childless woman. The great man bowed his laurelled head in deep sorrow, whilst his tears flowed freely. Then he spoke soothing words to the widowed mother, and said: "Your two younger children I adopt as my own." They were placed in the bosom of the smitten Lady Washington, in compensation for the loss of her own children; and when the canker of grief,

left the root of her affections, they were ingrafted upon the stem, and bore in abundance the blossoms and fruit of filial love, that solaced her declining years. They were pleasant lamps in the dwelling at that twilight hour of her life, when the chief luminary had been removed, and extinguished by the vapors of the tomb.

After the peace of 1783, Mount Vernon became a point of great attraction to distinguished visitors from Europe and the several American States. Hospitality was administered there on a liberal scale. Mrs. Washington performed its ceremonies with charming gaiety and sweetness, yet never forgetting, in the entertainment of guests, the more sober duties of a thorough Virginia housewife. She always presided at the table, and contributed her full share to the enjoyment of the hour. Her simple elegance of appearance and deportment, always commanded the admiration of friends and strangers; and when her husband was made the Chief Magistrate of the nation, and she became the conventional central figure in metropolitan society, her simple habits remained unchanged, and her larger household was arranged upon the frugal model of her home at Mount Vernon. She and her illustrious husband gave a marked example of Republican simplicity in their daily life—a simplicity regulated, however, by the most uncompromising dignity demanded by their exalted position. "The example of the President and his family," wrote Oliver Wolcott to his wife, "will render parade and expense improper and disreputable."

The weekly public receptions of Mrs Washington, like those of the President, were simple and dignified. She was averse to all ostentatious show and parade, yet she fully appreciated the gravity of her position, and was careful to exact those courtesies to which she was entitled. Her visitors on such occasions were only those persons who were connected with the Government, and their families ; foreign ambassadors and government agents, and their families ; and others who held good positions in fashionable and refined society, either on their own account, or their social relations. All were expected to be in full dress on those occasions.

The reception, which was always in the evening, was never allowed to last beyond the hour appointed, which was from eight to nine. She was careful not to allow public ceremonies to interfere with some of the life-long habits of herself and husband. He was usually at her side, and when the clock struck nine, she would say to those present, with a most complacent smile, "The General always retires at nine, and I usually precede him." In a few minutes the drawing-room would be closed, and the lights extinguished ; and the Presidential Mansion would be as dark and quiet before ten o'clock, as the home of any private citizen.

The restraints of metropolitan life were very irksome to Mrs. Washington. She was compelled to be governed by the etiquette prescribed for her. Under this discipline she was very restive, and

often yearned for the freedom and pure delights of her quiet home on the bank of the Potomac. To the wife of the President's nephew, she wrote :

"I live a very dull life here, and know nothing that passes in the town. I never go to any public place—indeed I think I am more like a State prisoner than anything else. There are certain bounds set for me which I must not depart from ; and, as I cannot do as I like, I am obstinate, and stay at home a great deal."

Mrs. Washington always spoke of the time when she was in public life, as her "lost days." She was in every respect, a model of a thrifty housekeeper. All day long that careful, bustling, industrious little woman kept her hands in motion. "Let us repair to the old lady's room," wrote Mrs. Colonel Carrington from Mount Vernon, to her sister, a short time before Washington's death :

"Let us repair to the old lady's room, which is precisely in the style of our good old aunt's—that is to say, nicely fixed for all sorts of work. On one side sits the chamber maid, with her knitting ; on the other, a little colored pet learning to sew. A decent old woman is there, with her table and shears, cutting out the negroes' winter clothes, while the good old lady directs them all, incessantly knitting herself. She points out to me several pair of nice colored stockings and gloves she had just finished, and presents me with a pair, half done, which she begs I will finish and wear for her sake. It is wonderful, after a life spent as these good people have necessarily spent theirs, to see

them, in retirement, assume those domestic habits that prevail in our country."

Yet household duties never kept Martha Washington from daily communion with God, in the solitude of her closet. She was a very early riser, leaving her pillow at dawn, at every season of the year. After breakfast, she invariably retired to her chamber, where she remained an hour reading the Scriptures, and engaged in thanksgiving and prayer. For more than half a century she practised such devotions in secret; and visitors often remarked that when she appeared after the hour of spiritual exercises, her countenance beamed with ineffable sweetness.

When almost seventy years of age, Mrs. Washington was called to endure her last great life trial. Her illustrious husband, with whom she had lived happily forty years, was suddenly smitten by disease while in the full vigor of health; and after suffering less than twenty-four hours, his mighty spirit left for its home with the Omnipotent Father. The blow was sudden and unexpected to the bereaved wife. She bore it with the fortitude of a faithful Christian. When, as she sat at the foot of the bed of her dying friend, his departure was announced by the waving of an attendant's hand, "'Tis well," she said. "All is now over; I shall soon follow him; I have no more trials to pass through."

Her solemn prophecy was soon fulfilled. A little more than two years after her husband's death, she joined him. A fever consumed her. Conscious

that the hour of her departure was near, she spoke to her assembled grand-children and other relatives, of the value of Religion as the Great Comforter of the soul, and discoursed to them concerning the practical duties of life, and the infinite importance of unceasing well-doing. Then commending them and her own spirit to the care of their Great Creator, she closed her eyes, and while in secret prayer, her spirit took wing for the Land of the Blessed.

Side by side, in white marble sarcophigi, near the bank of the Potomac and the Home they loved so well, repose the ashes of

GEORGE

AND

MARTHA WASHINGTON.